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MEDIA RELEASE

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TO UM FOREIGN-STUDENT ADVISER
'UNIVERSITY MEANS UNIVERSAL'

By Lisa Walser
Alumni Office
University of Montana

MISSOULA--

Surrounded by her luggage, Ruth Unteregger had been in Missoula only a few minutes when a man asked, "Do you need a porter?" "I heard him say, 'Do you need a border?' and I couldn't understand why he was asking me about borders when I had just crossed one!" she laughed. "It was then I realized that even though I knew English, learning to say, for example, 'How are you?' is different from hearing, 'How're you?'"

Unteregger, a 27-year-old Austrian, is working on her master's degree in counseling at the University of Montana. She is one of more than 170 foreign students from 40 countries studying at UM.

According to Effie Koehn, UM's adviser to foreign students, Unteregger's initial difficulty with the language is not a major problem for foreign students. "All foreign students have to have a certain proficiency in English before they are admitted to American universities," she explained, "but understanding the accents or the context of words may be difficult."

Koehn works in the UM Center for Student Development and serves as a link between the University and all foreign students and exchange scholars. She is well suited for this role. Of Greek heritage, Koehn grew up in Ethiopia, attended schools in the Sudan and Greece and then in 1964 came to the United

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foreign students--add one

States as an exchange student at Wells College in New York. She returned to Greece to complete her undergraduate work and then traveled to the University of Colorado where she received a master's degree in sociology and anthropology.

She married Peter Koehn in 1966 and became an American citizen in 1976, "the Bicentennial," Koehn said proudly. She considers her home Missoula, where Peter is a UM professor of political science. Their child, Nerissa, was born in 1973.

"The hardest thing for foreign students, or any other persons who go to a new environment, is that they don't know how to act," Koehn said. "They don't want to give rise to any misunderstanding, so they are pretty reserved.

"Talking from my own experience," she continued, "there are different adaptive levels the foreign student goes through.

"First is the spectator phase where everything is new and the student needs to get oriented--to find out what is acceptable behavior and what isn't.

"Then, the excitement wears off a little and the student has to face the reality of his or her situation. Students are usually a little bit depressed and homesick at this time.

"The third phase begins once they understand the social patterns and they start enjoying their stay and get more involved with people and activities."

Helping foreign visitors get to the third phase is part of Koehn's job. One way is through the Host Family Program in which a foreign student is assigned to a Missoula family that has volunteered for the program. Having a host family isn't mandatory, but most foreign students opt for the program, Koehn said. "Students don't live with their family, but the host family may invite the student to dinner, for a fishing trip, or just help answer questions," she explained.

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"The objective of the Host Family Program is to give both the student and the family an opportunity to learn from one another and to interact with a different culture," Koehn said. "Ideally, we try to set it up so both benefit. Who gets whom is arbitrary unless the host family indicates that it wants to know about a particular culture."

Some of the students develop strong ties to their "second family." Koehn still writes to her host family in Rochester, N.Y., 17 years since being with them.

Sampling American food can also be an experience for visiting students. Ruth Unteregger vividly remembers her Thanksgiving dinners in America. "I couldn't believe that they were piling all that food on one plate; it just seemed impossible!" she said. Unteregger's first meal when she returns to Austria will probably be sour milk soup and potatoes. "I tried to make it here but it's just not the same," she explained.

Not all memories of the United States will be good for foreign students. Fauzi Adlin, a 25-year-old student of business administration from Malaysia, made this comparison: "In Malaysia, if you see an American sitting alone at a table in a bar, you will ask him to join you. That doesn't happen here and it was a shock to me."

Koehn explained that foreign students usually find Americans very friendly and warm but that it may only be in certain situations. "They (foreign students) think that a long lasting friendship has been established and that may not be the case," she said.

Adlin also will not miss Montana's cold weather when he returns to tropical Malaysia, but he will miss the snow that he saw for the first time in his life. "It's beautiful," he said, "white and clean and it is the only thing I could never have back home."

The majority of foreign students at UM are majoring in the sciences or attend the professional schools, Koehn said. "Most return to live in their

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foreign students--add three

country after their schooling. Many of the foreign scholarships require this and U.S. immigration rules are quite strict."

According to Koehn, the trend nationwide shows that the international student population is increasing. "To me, the word University means universal," she said. "It's very much a part of an education to have foreign students on campus."

"The cultural exchanges between foreign students and Americans can also help facilitate development of economic activities. We are an interdependent world and it is important for us to find out how we are like each other and how we can work together for a better world."

Persons interested in hosting a foreign student should contact Koehn at UM's Center for Student Development, 243-4711.

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